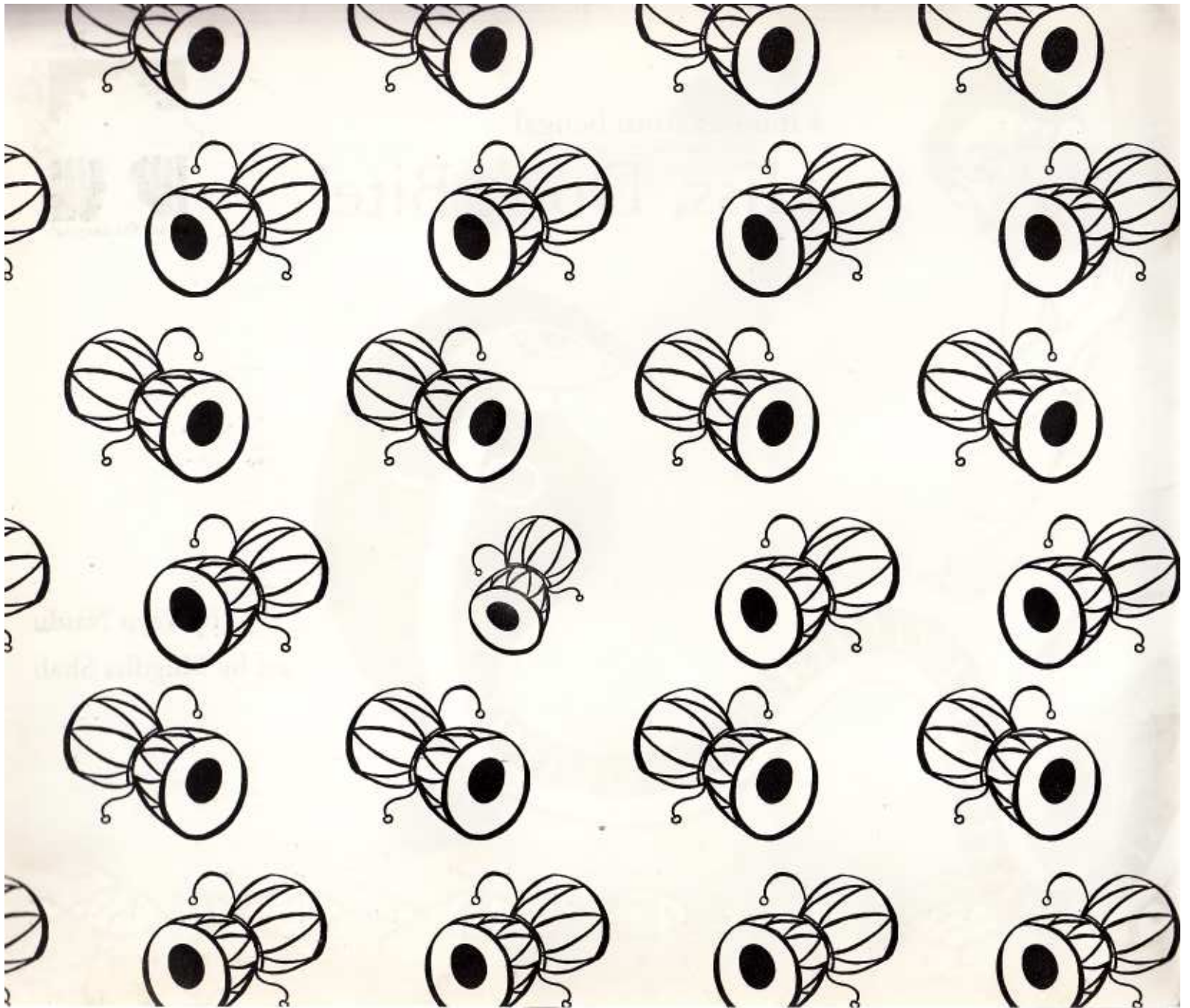


a folktale from bengal

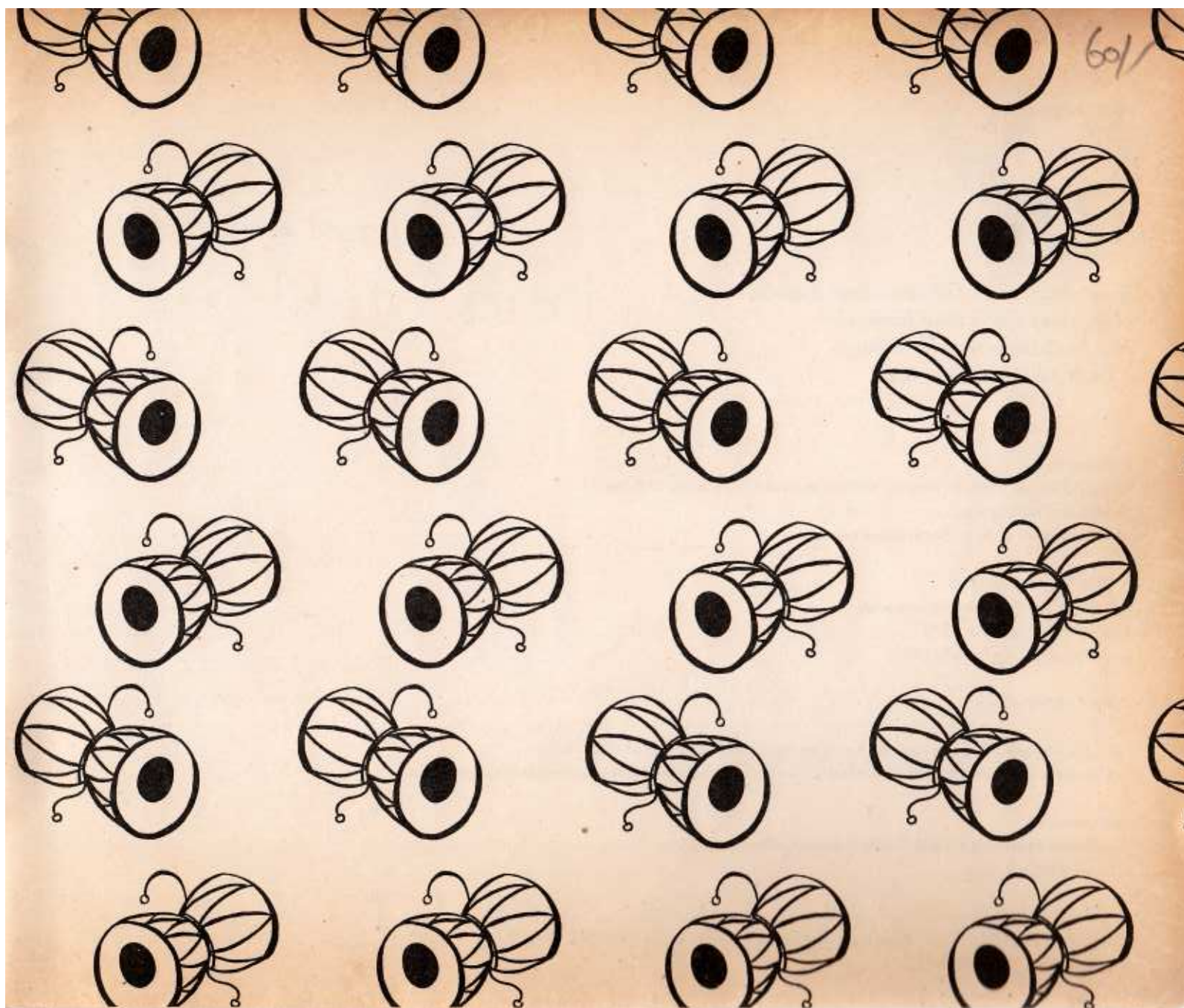
# Hiss, Don't Bite!



by Vayu Naidu  
art by Mugdha Shah









*Eyes on the Peacock's Tail* a story from Rajasthan

*Magic Vessels* a story from Tamilnadu

*Hiss, Don't Bite!* a story from Bengal

*A Curly Tale* a story from Bihar

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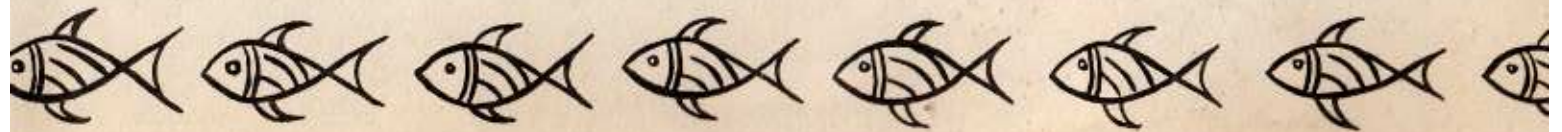
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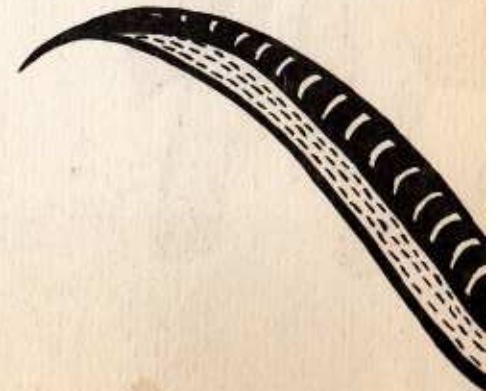


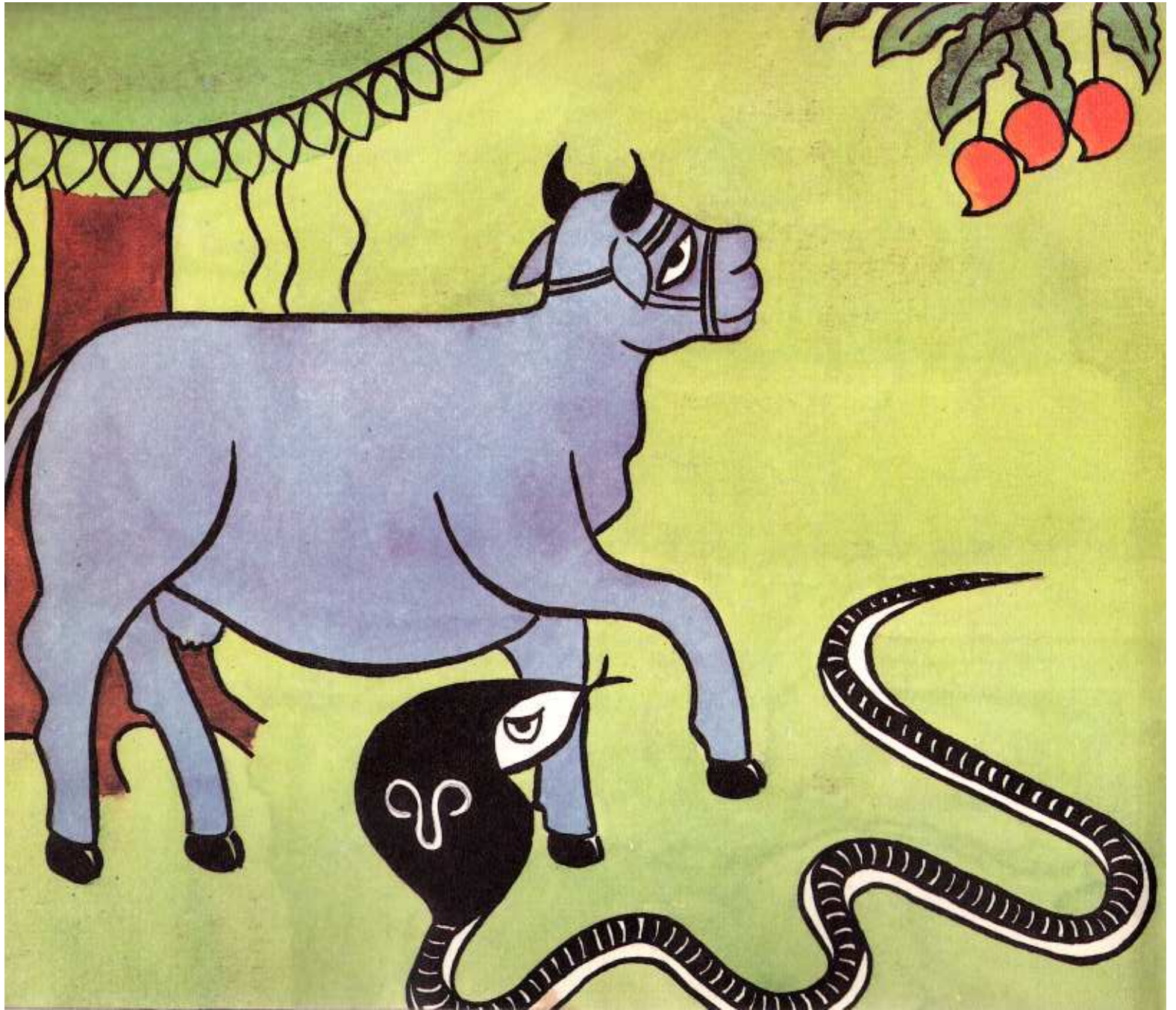


**I**t was night. The drums were beating softly in the distance. As the sounds became louder, children ran out of their houses. "The jatra is coming!" exclaimed one little boy. "Jatra!" shouted a little girl. "Haiya! We are going to have a play in our village tonight!" The children watched excitedly as the procession drew near. Some men carried hurricane lamps on their heads. When they reached the clearing beneath Banyan, they put down their lights in a circle.

The drums beat faster as the people gathered there. The smell of roasting peanuts filled the air. The October mist was thick and cold. Men, women and children wrapped their shawls tightly around themselves.

Suddenly the storyteller leaped out from behind Banyan. In his hand he held a one-stringed instrument, an ektara. His hair swung down to his waist. Everybody cheered because he was their favourite storyteller.







*Dhin-na-ka, dhin-na-ka, dhin-dhin!*

*Dhin-na-ka, dhin-na-ka, dhin-dhin!*

In a strong voice the storyteller began the night's tale.

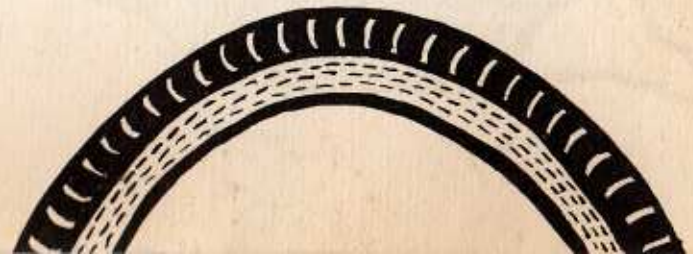
"A long time ago, in a tree just like this one, lived a cobra.

He was very handsome and he loved his sleek, black, shining coat and hood. He wore a dazzling diamond necklace.

"One day, as he sat in Banyan's shade, a cow came by. She was one of the cows the village children used to graze in the forest. She had strayed from the herd.

"Beside Banyan was a mango tree. The cow spotted a small bunch of mangoes entangled in Banyan's branches. Slurp! Her mouth watered. She jumped to reach the mangoes.

"The cobra saw this and reared his hood. 'How dare you!' he hissed. 'I live here and you don't even bother to ask me!' The cow was startled. Her hoof struck the cobra."







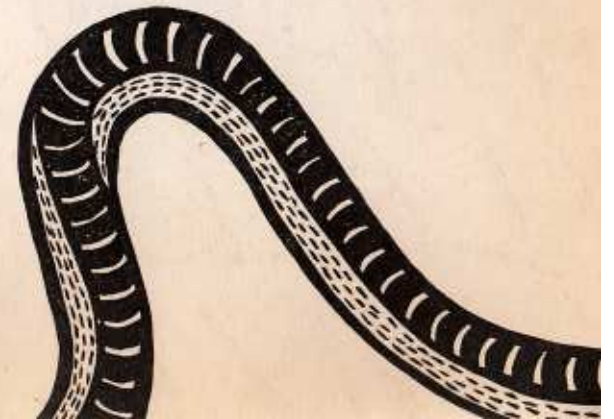
“The cobra was furious! Sssrrrk! he lifted his body and bit her in the leg. ‘Silly cow!’ he spluttered as he slid into his hole below Banyan. The cow died. The children saw what happened and they were frightened. They ran home and told their mothers and fathers how the cow had died.

“ ‘You should have been more careful,’ one mother said.  
‘She gave a lot of milk,’ a father said. ‘From now on you must take the cows and goats to graze in the open fields and not in the forest.’

“ ‘But we like to swing on Banyan,’ the children cried. ‘And we love to play games in the forest!’  
But the elders paid no attention to their wailing.”

*Dhin-na-ka, dhin-na-ka, dhin dhin!*

*Dhin-na-ka, dhin-na-ka, dhin dhin!*





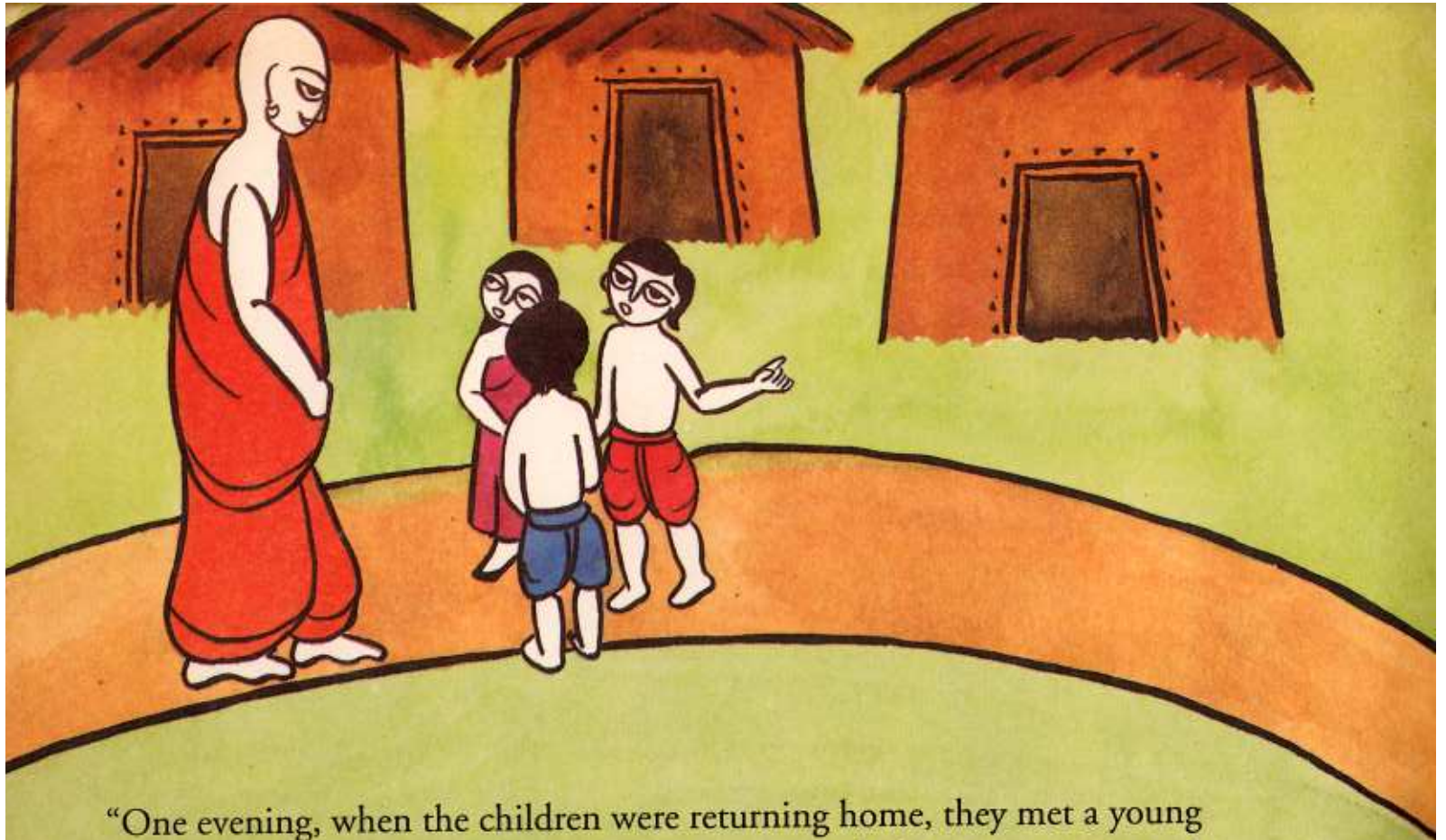


The storyteller whirled around as he skipped and danced. Latecomers kept coming and the circle of people around the lamps grew bigger. Hot sweet tea was poured from a huge kettle into little clay cups. Fresh puffed rice was served in tiny paper cones. The smell of kadamba flowers filled the air.

“What happened then?” the children asked.  
The drums changed their beat.  
*Ta-ki-ta dhi-ki-ta! Ta-ki-ta thi-ki-ta!*

The storyteller continued the story:  
“The children now took their cattle and goats to graze in the open fields. They went very early in the morning as the sun rose and the cock crowed. They herded the cows and goats together and led them far away. The sun was up very soon. There were no more fun and games as it was too hot, and there were not many trees.”





“One evening, when the children were returning home, they met a young monk who was passing through their village. His cloth was as orange as the sun that was setting. The children gathered around him, curious.

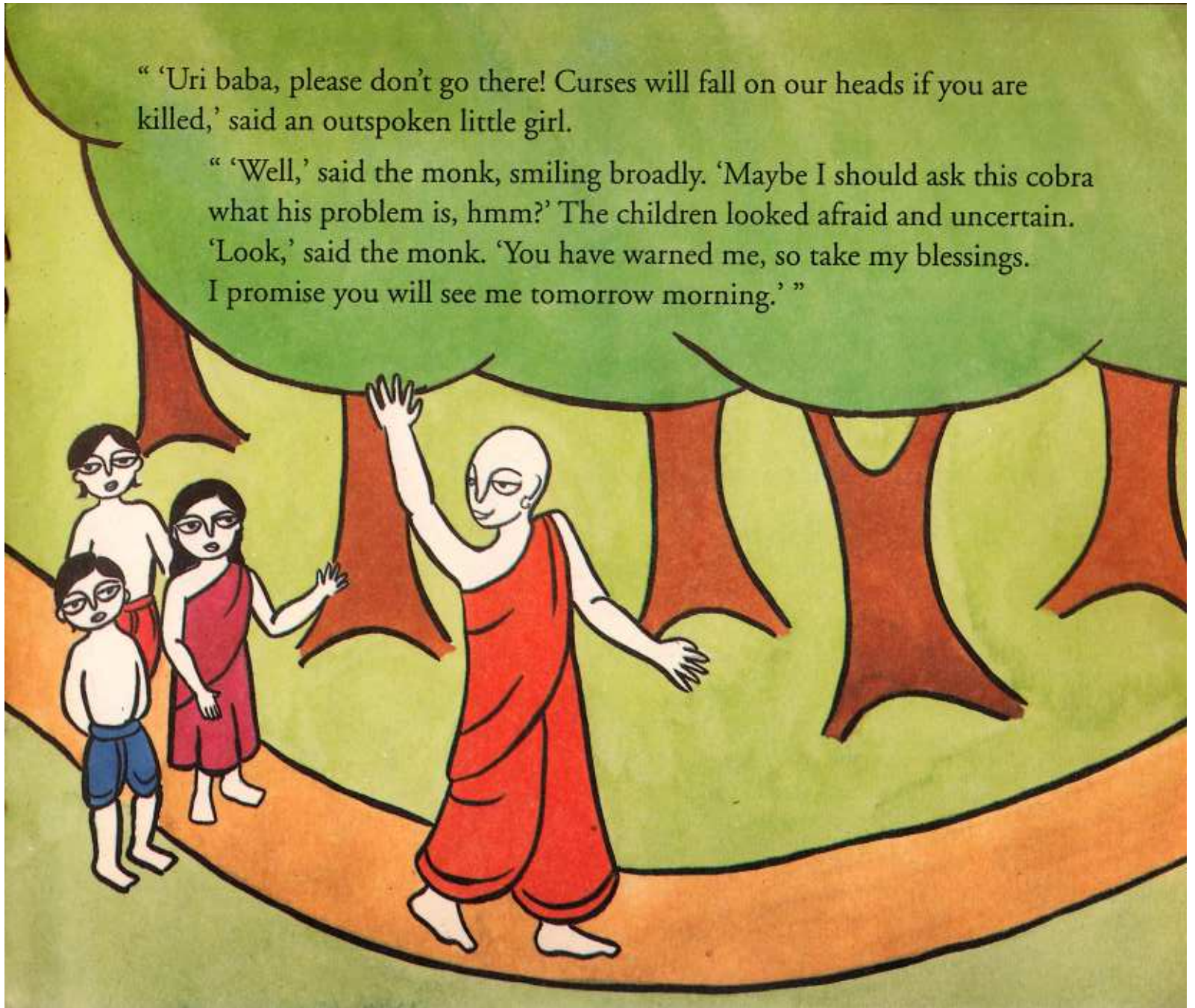
“ ‘Is there a forest close by?’ the monk asked in a sweet voice.

“ ‘Yes,’ they replied in chorus. Then the thinnest and boldest of them all said: ‘Sir, please don’t go there. There is a mean cobra who lives under Banyan. He killed one of our cows and...’ ”



“ ‘Uri baba, please don't go there! Curses will fall on our heads if you are killed,’ said an outspoken little girl.

“ ‘Well,’ said the monk, smiling broadly. ‘Maybe I should ask this cobra what his problem is, hmm?’ The children looked afraid and uncertain. ‘Look,’ said the monk. ‘You have warned me, so take my blessings. I promise you will see me tomorrow morning.’ ”

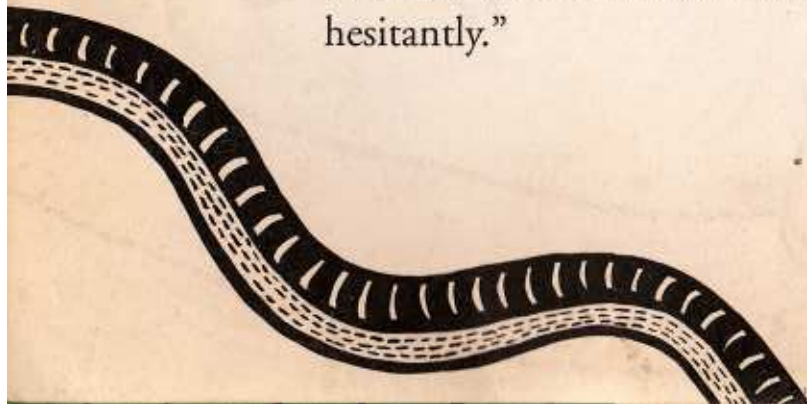


"The monk walked through the forest and found Banyan. He sat under it and began to sing in a soft, sweet voice. Banyan's leaves trembled with delight. The cobra crept out of his hole. He coiled his tail and settled down to listen. He closed his eyes and swayed with joy.

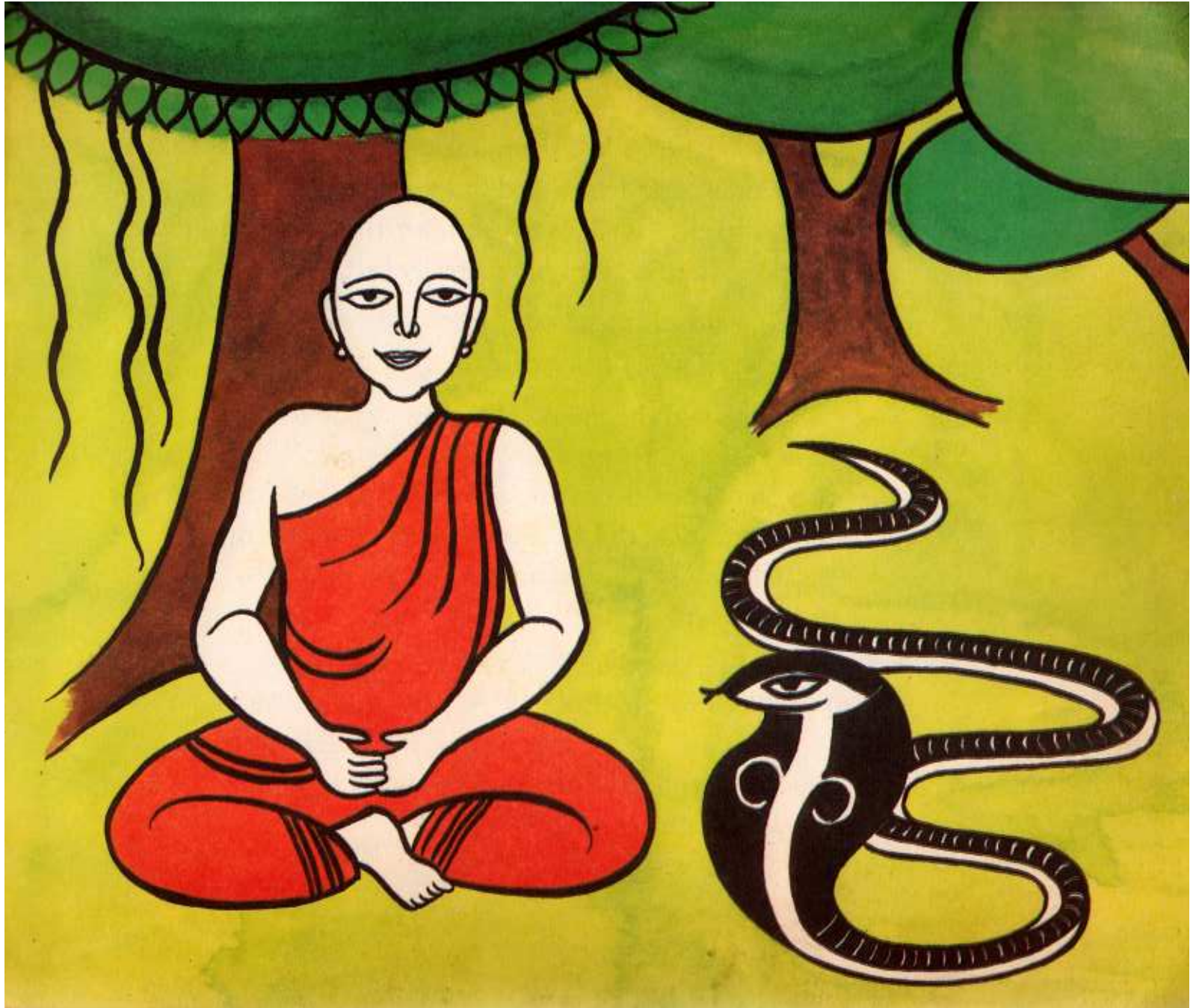
" 'Hello,' said the monk when he saw the cobra. 'You have such a beautiful place. I want to spend the night here. Do you mind?' The cobra felt very important. He spread his hood wide and replied: 'You're welcome. You are my special guest.'

"Then the monk said: 'You have everything you want, and more. Lucky, aren't you! Is there anything in your life you think you could do without?'

"The cobra was thrilled that such a wise a person was taking so much interest in him. 'Mm... not really, n..n.. no,' he said hesitantly."







“ ‘Are you sure?’ asked the monk gently. The cobra looked at the monk and felt he had found someone he could trust, a friend. ‘Well, to tell you the truth,’ he said almost blushing, ‘I... I... yes, I have a really bad temper.’

“Then, all in a rush, the words tumbled out: ‘How I can get rid of my temper? It gives me a really bad bellyache.’

“ ‘Hmm!’ said the monk. ‘The first step is admitting you have a temper. If you really want to do something about it you can.’ Then the monk leaned over and whispered to the cobra: ‘Sing this tune to yourself as many times as possible and soon your temper will go. And your bellyache will go too!’

“When the children saw the monk next morning, they were thrilled. ‘You’re alive! You’re alive!’ they shouted with joy. ‘Yes! And you can play as long as you like under old Banyan. The cobra will not hurt you,’ he said as he continued on his journey to another forest.”







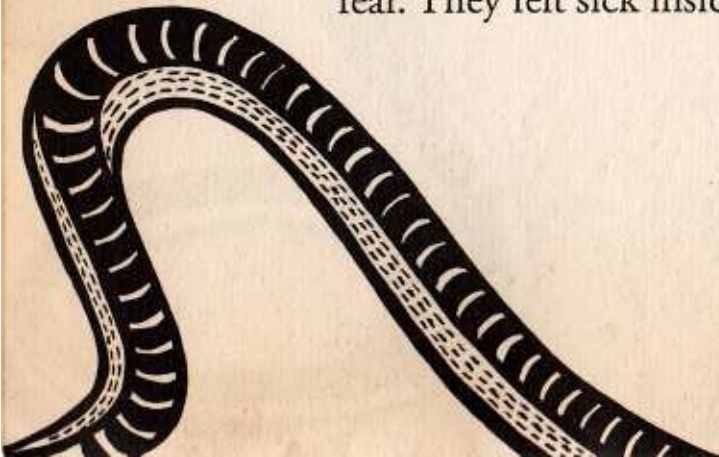
*Tana-nana-dhim-tana-nana-aa!*

*Tana-nana-dhim-tana-nana-aa!*

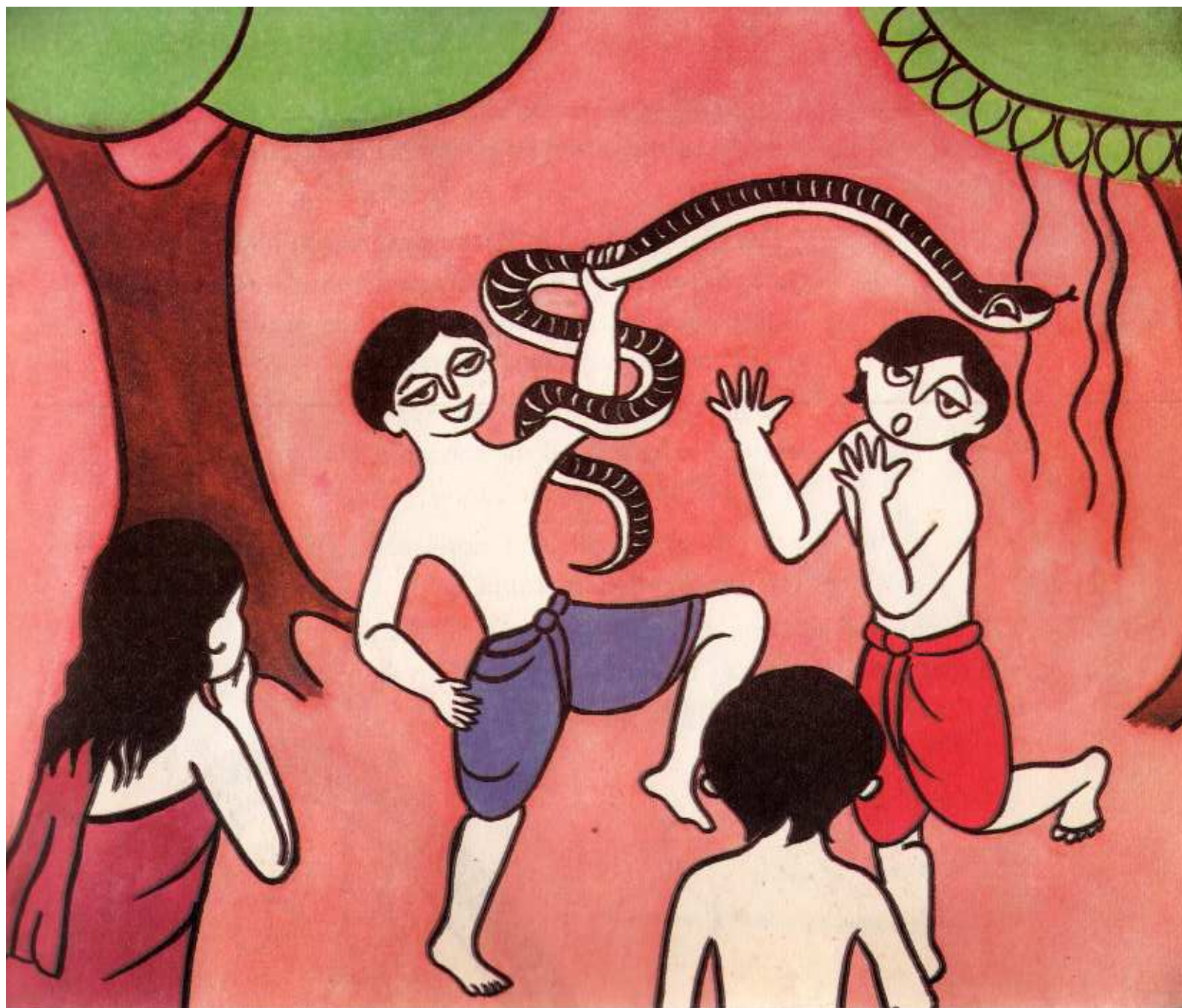
“After that the children danced and played for days on end under Banyan. The cobra kept humming the tune the monk had taught him and slowly he learned to control his temper. He began to find love and peace in everything he saw.

“One day a new boy arrived in the village. He saw the cobra and said: ‘O ho! So you’re the snake that killed the cow! Let’s teach you a lesson!’ Before any of the other children could stop him, he picked up the cobra by his tail. He swung the cobra round and round and whoosh! flung him far far away. The cobra fell limp to the ground.

“The children hurried home, their hearts thudding with fear. They felt sick inside and scared.”







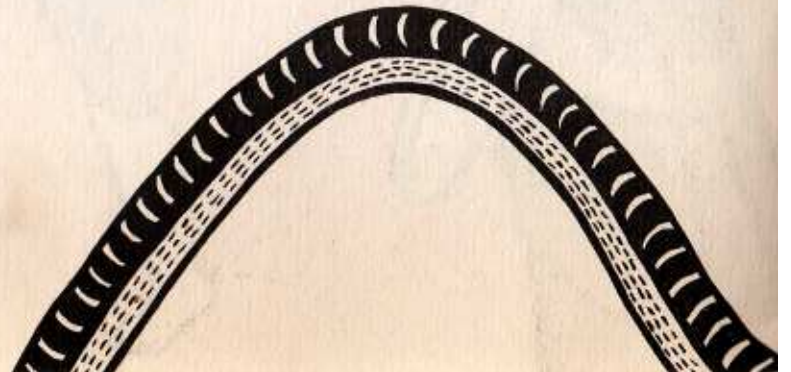
"A month passed. The monk came to the village again. 'The cobra is dead!' said the children tearfully as they gathered around him. They told him the ugly tale.

"The monk hurried to Banyan and began to sing. The cobra heard the music and dragged himself out of his hiding place. He came to the monk and rested his head wearily on his guru's lap. He was so happy he wept.

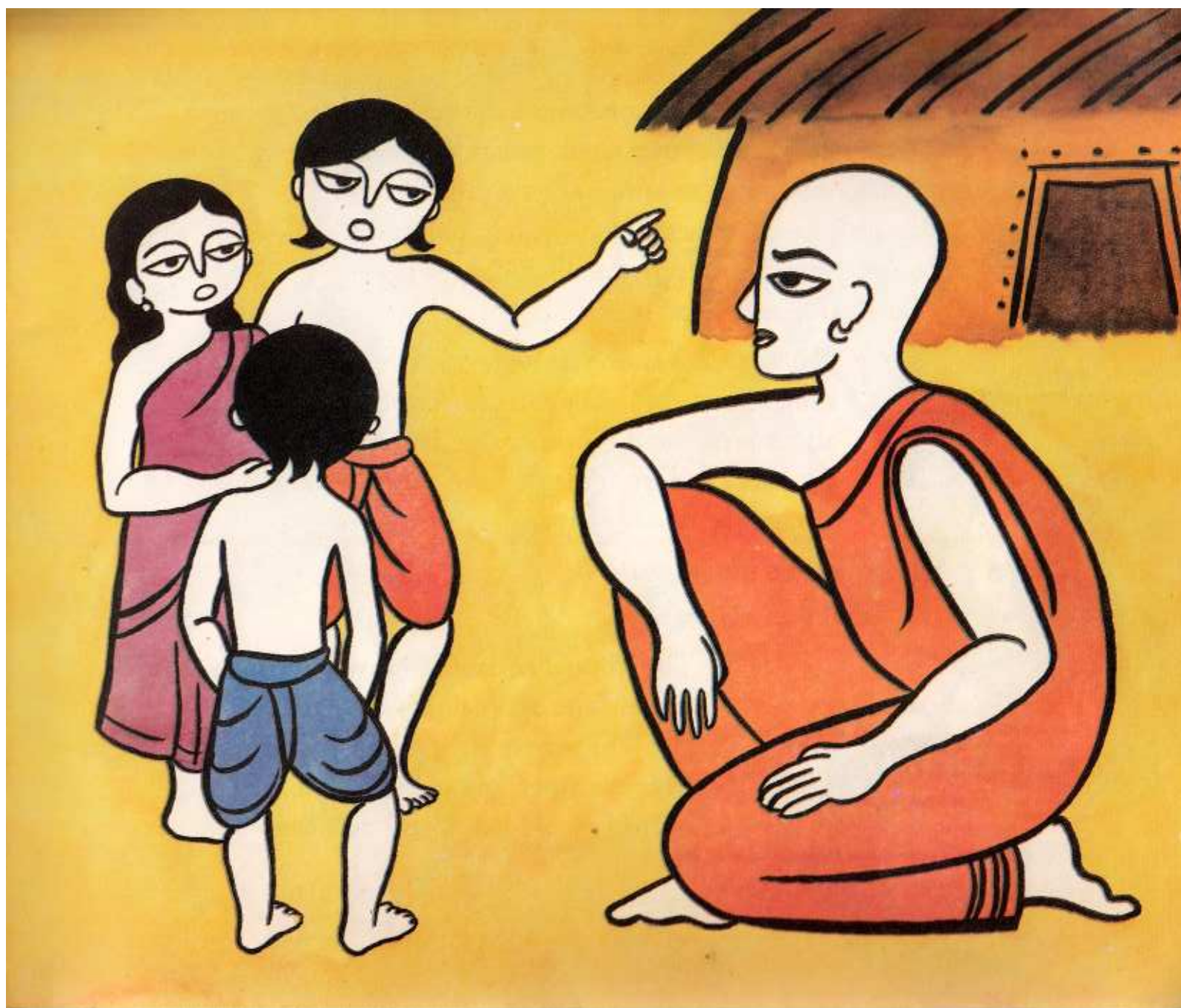
" 'What has happened to you my friend?' asked the monk tenderly as he stroked the cobra's head. 'Oh! I found so much peace,' sighed the cobra.

"But why do you look so ill?' the monk asked. 'N-no, it's nothing. I'm fine,' replied the cobra.

" 'The children said you were attacked,' said the monk. 'Oh that!' said the cobra. 'You know how children are. But the boy didn't mean any harm. See, I'm alive!' "







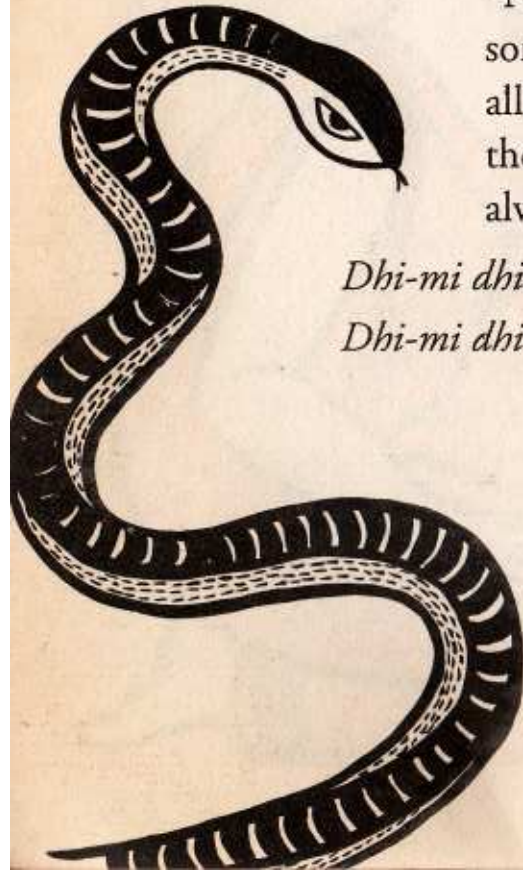
“ ‘Silly fool!’ said the monk affectionately. ‘I showed you a way not to lose your temper over small things. But when someone bullies you or tries to hurt you, you must protect yourself. You are a snake, remember! All you have to do is hiss. That’s how you will protect yourself and warn the attacker. Hiss, dear friend, don’t bite!’

“Now the cobra understood. And the next time someone tried to bully him, he hissed and hissed with all his breath and slipped away. The children cheered the cobra and from then on they played as they always had under Banyan.”

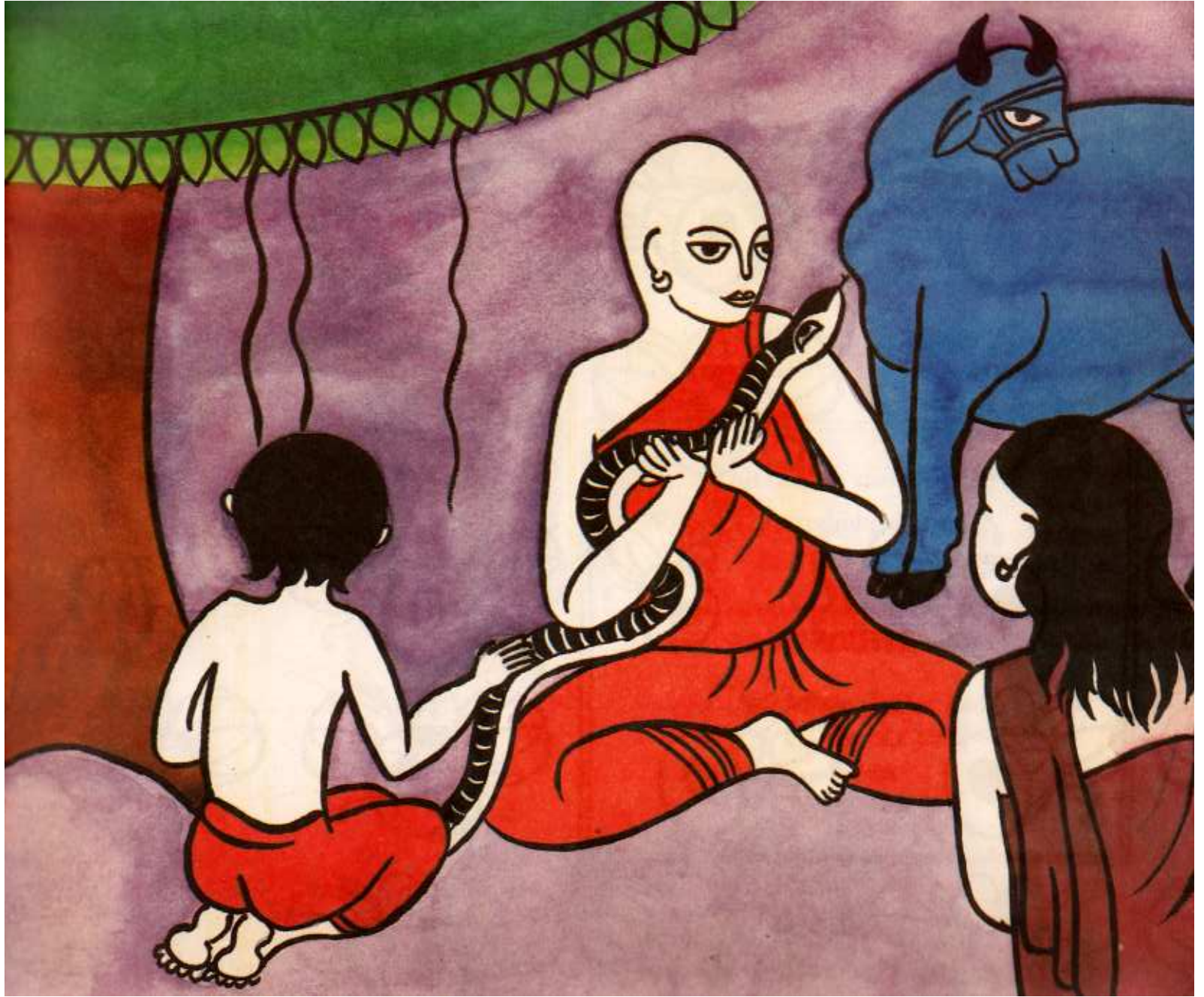
*Dhi-mi dhi-mi dhi-mi tha!*

*Dhi-mi dhi-mi dhi-mi tha!*

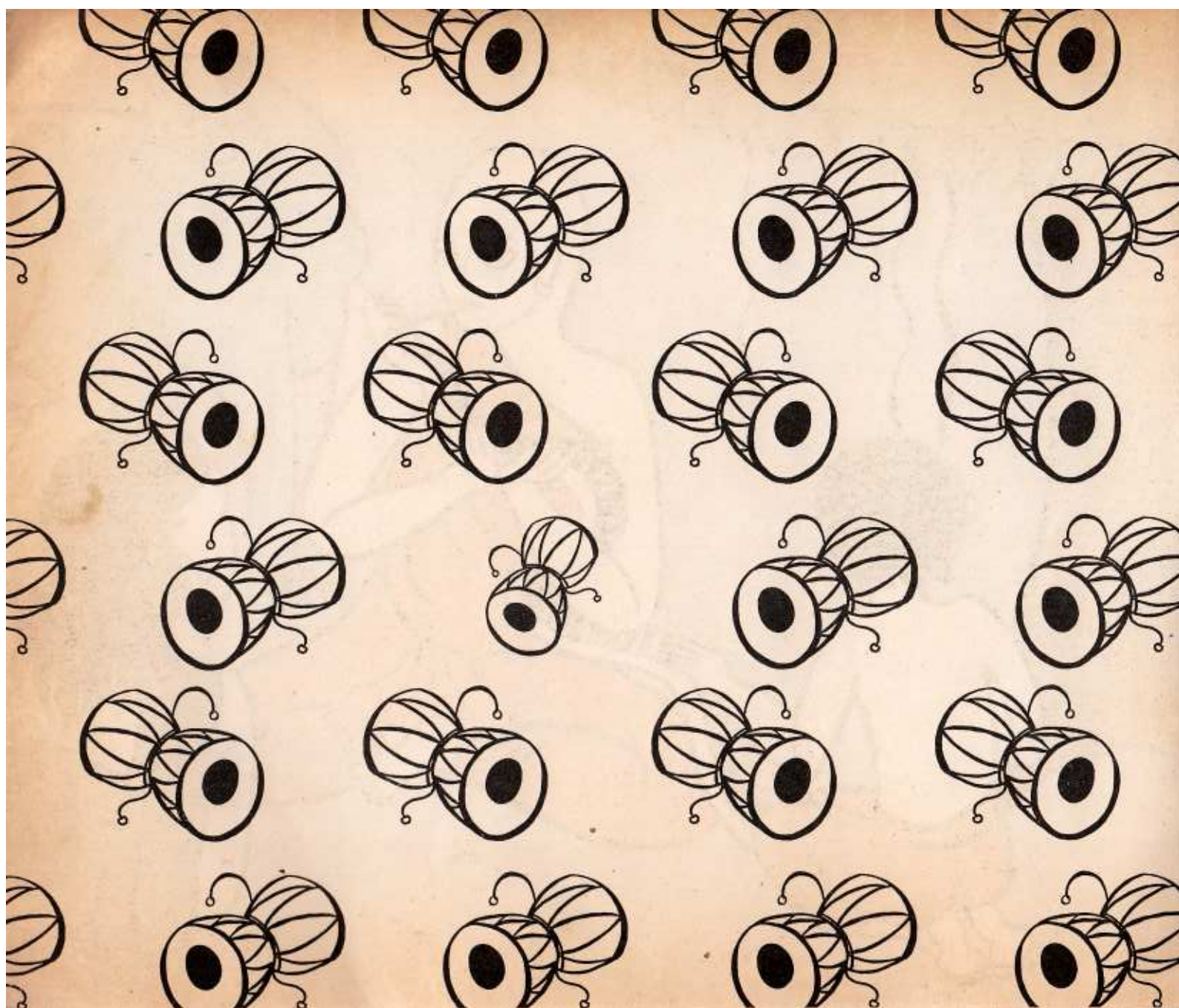
The storyteller danced his way through the crowd. The lights slowly dimmed and then died out. The people went home, humming melodies from the story, and everyone felt they had learned an old lesson in a new way.













*under the banyan* Many things happen under the banyan. Weary travellers rest in its shade, wise men meditate, villagers sit together to settle disputes. They also listen to stories. This is a series of folk stories from different parts of India. These stories are also available as audio cassettes. Ideal for four years and above.

*Hiss, Don't Bite!* from Bengal is the third story in this series. A bad-tempered snake kills a cow and everyone is afraid . . . until a wandering monk tells the snake a secret that changes his life. And theirssssss!

Dr Vayu Naidu is a writer, storyteller and performer. She was awarded Europe's first PhD in performance oral traditions from India at the University of Leeds. She is the founder and artistic director of Brumhalata Intercultural Storytelling Company based in Birmingham, UK. She has performed at storytelling, literature and music festivals in Greece, Sweden, France, Germany, Portugal, Italy and India.

Mugdha Shah did the illustrations and design for all six books in this series as part of her diploma project for the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, where she is a student of Graphic Design.

*The illustrations are adapted from the Kalighat style of painting. Traditionally, these paintings have strong brush lines filled in with water colour. Popularised by patuas — the painters — living near the Kali temple in Calcutta, Kalighat paintings are mostly on themes from ordinary life. Often the pictures made fun of the customs and ways of life of people in the city.*

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